

Who are the Blessed?

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[0 : 00] to hear, alert minds, soft hearts, and feet that are swift to follow. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Well, this past week I stumbled across a computer-generated image, an artist's impression of the cast of the American sitcom from 1990's Friends, depicted as they might appear in their old age. And it got me thinking, and it got me thinking, I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but what it will be like when you're old, what it will be like in old age, if and when we get to old age. And of course, there are no guarantees. And for some of us here this morning, that might seem like a very long way off indeed. Or maybe you feel like you're there already.

Don't suppose Gordon feels any younger after Simon's announcement this morning about a mere spring chicken compared to Jacob. And certainly for some of us, the years in front of us are becoming fewer than the years behind us.

[1 : 21] What will we be like in old age? Will we consider ourselves among the blessed? Will we be a blessing to others in our old age?

And according to the chapters this morning, it's not only possible to be a blessing, but it shows how even in old age, perhaps especially in old age, our lives can have dignity, significance, and God-given purpose in the way we bless others.

And it's never too late. Jacob's life is testament to that. In this old age, as he approaches the end of his time on earth, Jacob realizes that he has been blessed by God.

And so in turn, he blesses three sets of people. Now we're going to be looking at these three sets in just a moment.

But before we do so, if we're to make sense of these three last but one chapters in the book of Genesis, then we need to be reminding ourselves of where we started, how the story begins.

[2 : 37] And so that way we'll see how these chapters tie up some of the loose threads that are woven throughout the book of Genesis. How we came into being with God's blessing.

How sin entered into the world resulting in God's curse and how God's plan to set his people through involved his promise of a savior through the offspring of the woman.

Blessing, curse, promise. These strands have been there all the way through the book of Genesis. And they're interwoven throughout.

So right back in the very first chapter, God created humanity in his own image. In his own image, he created them male and female. And then in the very next verse, God blessed them.

And he said to them, be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth. So right from the outset of Genesis, God's blessing is connected to this command to be fruitful.

[3 : 51] When Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden to sin because of their sin, this resulted in God's curse on everyone.

So one kid's Bible puts it like this. Life would be hard from then on. The ground would be hard. Work would be hard.

Marriage would be hard. Having babies would be hard. And death would be really hard. Yet even though this messed things up, God made a promise in Genesis chapter 3 that one day from the offspring of a woman would come a savior, a snake crusher to defeat the serpent and save God's sinful people.

And so in a sense, all the way through the book of Genesis, that's what we've been expecting.

Every time there's been a child born, that's what we've been hoping for. A child born that would become the savior of the world.

Blessing, curse, promise. Blessing, curse, promise. And we're going to see how these three strands are tied up at the end of the book as Jacob blesses these three groups of people.

[5 : 10] He blesses his 12 sons in chapter 49. He blesses his two grandsons, the sons of Joseph in chapter 48. And then in chapter 47, we'll see who blesses who.

So if you're following along in the notes and the bulletin, this is our first heading this morning. Whose blessing who? Chapter 47. And it would be a great help if you keep your Bible open there. The world tries to project on us its idea of who is blessed. Now, it doesn't use that terminology necessarily, but living the dream or living your best life, it's the same idea. And that's the function of influencers on social media to give us a window into what the blessed life looks like. Blessed according to the world, that is. And it's the same with the entire advertising industry. If only you buy this expensive serum, then you'll stay young and beautiful. Now, we're going to see in chapter 47 that the world doesn't get to dictate who's blessed.

[6 : 21] There's two scenes in this chapter. First scene, Joseph introduces his father and his brothers to his boss, Pharaoh. And in the second scene, Joseph provides for the entire country in a time of great famine.

So in the first scene, Joseph's already introduced his brothers to Pharaoh. And Pharaoh's given them the best of the land. And then in verse 7, we read that Joseph brought Jacob in and presented him to Pharaoh.

So we have this extraordinary scene in the palatial courts of the Pharaoh, where this old shepherd is brought in and stood before the Pharaoh, the leader of the world's greatest superpower. In fact, so ancient is Jacob that Pharaoh can't help but ask the question, how old are you? And the leader of the world's current superpower was in trouble this week for asking impertinent age-related questions.

But here, the Pharaoh can't help himself. How old are you? And Jacob replies, the years of my pilgrimage are 130. Few and evil, literally, have been the years of my life.

[7 : 41] 130 years old, but his days are few and evil. So what on earth can he mean? Well, I take it that now that he's an old man and reflecting back on his life, he realizes that for much of his life, the years have been wasted, marked by failure and stubbornly doing things his own way rather than God's way.

Maybe that's how you feel this morning. Maybe you feel that your years have been wasted. If that's the case, then let me point you to Jacob, because there is hope for us all.

And so I take it that Jacob's remarks to Pharaoh are indicative of a change of character in Jacob, even at this late stage in the game, and genuine remorse for his own failings.

And so it's worth repeating here that it's really never too late for any of us to turn to the Lord. But you know, the most extraordinary thing about this whole meeting between Jacob and Pharaoh is that it is Jacob who blesses Pharaoh and not the other way around.

Did you notice that in verse 7 and then again in verse 10? Jacob blesses Pharaoh. The shepherd blesses the leader of the superpower.

[9 : 15] The world doesn't dictate who's blessed because the blessing is tied in with God's promise. That's why at the end of the chapter, Jacob makes Joseph swear to him in verse 29.

Do not bury me in Egypt for all its material wealth. When I die, bring me back to the land of promise. Do you see where Jacob's fixed his gaze? We too need to fix our gaze to our future hope.

We need to be setting our sights on that hope and live in light of that promised horizon. Now, in the second part of the chapter from verse 13 and following, we see that the world cannot dictate who's blessed because actually there's things outwith the world's control.

There's a severe famine throughout the land of Egypt. And remember those threads running throughout the book. The ground is cursed. Work is cursed. But we're shown how God provides for the people.

[10 : 31] Through Joseph, God blesses the people. Now, we come to this part of the Bible and we read this bit about exchanging things for food, exchanging money, exchanging livestock.

And we think, why can't he just give them some handouts? Why can't he just give them the food? And then we get to the part in verse 19 about exchanging land and personal freedom for food. Now, that doesn't sit well, does it, with our modern sensibilities? It seems that there's a redistribution of wealth going on, a disaster capitalism where the rich get richer at everyone else's expense.

That's before we even get started on the whole slavery thing. Now, time will not permit our fuller discussion this morning.

But before we turn off completely, our thoughts should be informed and colored by at least the following three points.

[11 : 39] Firstly, it's the people's idea. They're the ones who suggest it. Buy us and our land in exchange for food.

And we, with our land, will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Secondly, we should look at the terms of the contract. In verse 23, they get given the seeds.

They give 20% of their produce to Pharaoh and get to keep the other 80%. And so, seeing in that light, it doesn't compare too unfavorably to the taxation system that we have in the United Kingdom. And then, thirdly, verse 25, just look at their reaction. You have saved our lives. Please, let us sign on the dotted line.

You have saved our lives. If it weren't for their benevolent master, they would be dead. And we could say the same thing if we're Christians, couldn't we?

[12 : 49] If it weren't for our saviour, we would be dead to sin, in sin. But we are no longer slaves to sin.

We are gladly slaves to our benevolent master, slaves to righteousness. One more thing, just before we move on to the next chapter.

Just look with me again at verse 27. And see how one of the loose threads is tied up here. Now, the Israelites settled in Egypt and were fruitful and increased greatly in number.

So in the beginning, God blessed humanity and commanded them to be fruitful and multiplying. Later on in the story, when we get to Abraham, God promises to make him fruitful.

And into a great nation. And here we see at least the partial fulfillment of that promise. From command to promise to statement of fact, they were fruitful and increased greatly in number.

[14 : 06] Isn't God faithful to his promise? So we've seen that the world doesn't dictate who is blessed.

That prerogative belongs to the God from whom all blessings flow. Well, in chapter 48, we can't spend so much time here, but I want us to see that God's blessing subverts our cultural expectations as Jacob blesses the younger of his two grandsons.

In other words, God consistently blesses those we might least expect. Those the world often overlooks.

And that's good news for us too. So in the ancient Near East, the firstborn son was considered the blessed one.

The birthright belonged to him. The blessing of a double inheritance belonged to him. Well, here at the end of his life, and not for the first time, Jacob upsets the cultural norms.

[15 : 12] But in doing so, he shows us how we can be a gospel influence if we would invest in the lives of our young people. That's what Robbie came up and talked to us about a few weeks ago if you were here.

And whether that's our own children or grandchildren, whether it's helping in creche or kids zone, we can be a gospel influence.

Every month, my dad writes to each of his seven grandchildren each month on the date of their birth.

He writes them a letter about his faith in the Lord Jesus. He doesn't send them the letters, but he collates them into a book which they receive when they are 10 years old.

And it's his way of ensuring a gospel influence and legacy in their lives. Well, that's one idea, but there are lots of ways that we can speak into the lives of our children and prayerfully seek to raise them for Christ.

[16 : 21] Remember those loose threads that we're tying up here. Blessing, curse, and promise. It is the family of God's people who are entrusted with his promise.

That's why this passage is so significant. In fact, it's so significant that in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, out of all the things that Jacob's done in his life, it's the outstanding thing that he's commended for in Hebrews chapter 11.

Blessing, Ephraim and Manasseh. Life and hope depend on the seed of a woman. God's purposes of salvation will be achieved through marriage and childbirth.

And it's a passage that's meant to remind us of the story of Jacob and Esau, like a replay of Jacob obtaining the blessing from his father Isaac by pretending to be his brother Esau when Isaac was an old man with failing eyesight.

So in verse 10 of chapter 48, we're told that Jacob's eyes too were failing because of old age and he could hardly see. But he knows what he's doing here.

[17 : 35] So Joseph presents his sons to their grandfather and positions them so that the elder brother Manasseh will receive the double blessing. We can see again in the wording of the blessing in verse 15 that at the end of his life, Jacob has come to recognize that through it all God has preserved him and sustained him.

And what a wonderful assertion it is. God has been my shepherd all my life to this day.

The first time in the Bible that God is referred to as a shepherd. God has been my shepherd all my life to this day. May he bless these boys.

Then we have this almost comical scene when Joseph realizes that there's been a switch and Jacob's switched his hands and placed his right hand on Ephraim's head to signal that the younger son will be doubly blessed.

And that's what Ephraim means, doubly fruitful. And so Joseph grabs hold of his dad's hands to move it back to Manasseh and a struggle ensues.

[18 : 57] But an arm wrestle with Jacob is ill-advised because he was a man who was born grabbing onto his older brother's heel, trying to pull him back into the womb so that he could claim firstborn rights.

And then later on, Jacob wrestles with God for the blessing that God intended for him all along. Now Jacob wrestles with his own son Joseph to ensure that Ephraim is put ahead of Manasseh. Verse 19, Jacob refused and said, I know what I'm doing. Manasseh too will become a people, but nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he.

God consistently chooses the younger rather than the older, overturning cultural expectations, choosing the weak things of the world to shame the strong, choosing a crucified Messiah to conquer the serpent.

So moving on to chapter 49. At the end of his life, Jacob again models for us how to live at the end of our lives.

[20 : 19] Now we're not patriarchs prophetically bestowing our blessing in the same way, but we have been commissioned by Christ to go forth and bless those around us with the good news, to be fruitful and multiply, baptizing disciples into God's kingdom.

At the end of his life, Jacob says what needs to be said. He blesses his sons and calls them to repentance where need be. Now we don't have time to go through each of these sons, but we should note that they are recorded and ordered for us strategically to highlight what he will say to Jacob and Joseph in particular.

And these blessings show us his priorities, his hope for a savior. So right in the middle of the chapter in verse 18, that's what Jacob's crying out for.

Lord, I look for your deliverance. Jacob is looking forward to the Messiah, one who will bring salvation, and that's what the reader is looking for too.

That's what we're looking for. Could this be the one? Could this be the one? But as we begin reading through the list, we realize that with a couple of exceptions, they're basically all useless.

[21 : 47] So first up, we have Reuben, the firstborn. He probably thought he was going to be exalted with the way that Jacob begins. But then in verse four, Jacob reveals his disgust disgust with his son that his firstborn should have defiled his own father's bed.

He's forfeited his birthrights and sexual immorality. And Simeon and Levi don't fare much better. Such is their violence that their father, their own father, doesn't even want to be around them. And so we come on to the two most prominent of the twelve, Judah and Joseph.

We'll deal with Judah's blessing last because it is the most important. So reading from verse 22, Joseph is described in terms not dissimilar to the blessed man that Simon read out for us from Jeremiah 17.

A fruitful vine or branch near a spring of water. And then the flack that Joseph receives in verse 23 alludes to the suffering Joseph has already experienced all through his life.

[23 : 10] the way his brothers persecuted him the false accusations from Potiphar's wife. That he was able to endure all this because verse 24, because of the hand of the mighty one of Jacob, it

was God behind the scenes who helped Joseph.

And then in verse 25 there's this incredible description of life under God's favor and recognition again that it is God from whom all blessings flow.

Joseph is an important type of Christ. And so at the end of Genesis we've already seen how Joseph has in some ways become a savior of the world in resolving the famine.

And Joseph points forward to the true savior, even Christ Jesus the snake crusher who like Joseph will bring about reconciliation between himself and his brothers as he extends forgiveness to those who have sought his life.

But this promised Messiah will not come from the line of Joseph but from the tribe of Judah. So let's return to verse 8 Jacob's blessing on Judah.

[24 : 36] Judah your brothers will praise you. Now this is a play on words. The name Judah sounds like praise in Hebrew. When Leah gave birth to Judah she says this time I will praise the Lord.

By the way that's our daughter's middle name Odelia a Hebrew name that doesn't feature in the Bible as a name as such but it's the same phrase that Leah uses I will praise the Lord Odelia.

And Jacob here in this blessing turns it around your brothers will praise you. So his father recognises that here is one worthy of praise in Judah.

Judah had a terrible start but out of all his brothers he is most Christ-like in the way that he offered himself as a substitute in Benjamin's place.

Jacob goes on your father's sons will bow down to you. This is Joseph's dream isn't it? Of his brothers bowing down to him fulfilled for Joseph in the courts of Pharaoh but it's applied here by Jacob to the line of Judah and will be fulfilled fully when every knee shall bow at the name of Jesus when the lion of the tribe of Judah is seen to be triumphant.

[26 : 05] And then in verse 10 we have the most explicitly messianic statement of all. The scepter will not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from beneath his feet.

The promise of an everlasting king until he to whom it belongs shall come Christ Jesus the king of kings. So here at last in Judah's blessing is a description of the serpent crusher.

And finally in verses 11 to 12 we have this poetic description of a new Eden where the curse on the land and labor is lifted and abundance is restored such that it doesn't matter if a donkey is tethered to the vine and eats the grapes.

There's more than enough to go around. He'll even wash his garments in wine his robes in the blood of grapes. This is poetic language so don't try this at home kids.

And if you must then white wine is probably better than red. What will we be like in old age? How will we use those years for God's glory?

[27 : 23] I first heard about the little known Irishman T.S. Mooney several years ago at a conference where Alistair Begg was speaking. Mooney was a lifelong bachelor who through leading a weekly crusaders class had a gospel influence on the lives of countless boys in Ulster and beyond.

Alistair Begg recalls staying at Mooney's house in London and Mooney introduced him to what he called his rogues gallery. These were pictures all over his living room of the boys.

He faithfully prayed for day by day. But what stood out for me most from Begg's talk is about how Mooney died.

Mooney lived alone as a bachelor and had a housekeeper who came in regularly to take care of his domestic affairs. She arrived on this particular morning. She was not met by his normal cheery smile and bright eyes.

She found Mooney sprawled across his bed. He was fully dressed in his tweed and obviously began his day as usual because when others were called in to help and they moved his body we discovered that he had fallen on top of his prayer list.

[28 : 48] Fallen dead on top of those he was praying for. He had gone to heaven praying for his rogues. What a way to live. What a way to die. How does Jacob die?

He dies knowing that God has blessed him in spite of the way he lived his life. He dies knowing that God's promises are secure that God is going to raise a king that the land will be made new that the curse will be taken away.

We want to be living our lives now so that we can die like Jacob died. So that we can die like Mooney died.

Hoping in Christ. Blessing those around us. Blessing our children. Blessing our children's children. Down through the generations. Extending Christ's kingdom and family until the age to come. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, teach us how to live well.

[29 : 58] How to die well. How to hope in your promises. How to be praying for our children and our children's children.

That they may walk in the path of blessing and be a blessing to others by extending your grace to every corner of this world. May this church, may your people be fruitful and multiply with gospel growth in the days ahead.

To the glory of Christ Jesus. Amen.